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Editorial

Since the CFP for this Special Issue of *Inscriptions*, titled "Navigating the Critical Zone: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Aesthetical Explorations, and Theoretical Paradigms," was launched in May 2024, the world has witnessed another round of extreme climate events, such as the Central European floods caused by the low-pressure system Boris, the severe devastation brought by Typhoon Yagi in Southeast Asia and China, the Category 3 Hurricane Milton on the coast of Florida, U.S., and the flash floods in Valencia, Spain. Although it remains difficult to directly attribute these events to anthropogenic climate change, scientists agree (see Chapter 11 in the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report) that climate warming significantly contributes to the intensification and likelihood of extreme weather events. In addition, as we write this Editorial, news is coming that 2024 was the first year in which average global temperature breached the 1.5°C threshold above pre-industrial levels, as confirmed by the Copernicus Climate Change Service and the World Meteorological Organization. This milestone signals the normalization of climate extremes, which will intensify disruptions that fracture social, economic, and political systems across the globe.

While traditional environmental humanities have employed ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and Marxist critique to interrogate the socio-political dimensions of ecological devastation, emerging perspectives urge scholars to further interlink nature and ontology with cultural, technological, and ideological discourses. The concept of "critical zone," introduced by American geologist Gail Ashley in 1998 and further developed by contemporary earth scientists (see Brantley et al. 2007; Giardino and Houser 2015), denotes a dynamic interface where geological, biological, and atmospheric processes converge to sustain and regulate life at Earth's surface. In the humanities and social sciences, the term, often employed in the plural ("critical zones"), has been used to signify sites of entanglement where human and non-human forces – ecological, political, and technological – converge, making such sites crucial for understanding life in the Anthropocene (see Latour and Weibel 2020 and the online seminar Arts of the Critical Zone). More recently, Rodanthi Tzanelli, in "Environmental Imaginaria in the Age of Extinction: Perspectives from the 'Critical Zone'" (2024), has described the critical zone as a site that is actively mediated, reimagined, and instrumentalized in cultural narratives and economic systems. Tzanelli explores how environmental representations function as curated compositions that construct themed environments shaped by media, tourism, and scientific discourse. These representations, she argues, actively influence the public understanding of nature, often distilling it into consumable, commodified forms.

As the physical critical zone undergoes irreversible transformations, such as desertification, coastline erosion, and biodiversity loss, the humanities and social sciences are confronted with the necessity of articulating modes of existence in a fundamentally altered world. Scientists warn that, in light of ongoing climate crises, "much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperilled" (see Ripple et al. 2024). Thus, a transdisciplinary approach is needed to reframe the critical zone as an intersection of environmental and cultural crises, where

various intellectual traditions converge to reassess human relationships with the planet. The escalation of climate and social crises demands that scholarship not only documents but also intervenes in the discussion, forging discourses attuned to the complexities of a planet in convulsion. Far from being neutral, discourses that engage with or from the critical zone have an extensive impact – one that this issue of *Inscriptions* aims to investigate.

More specifically, the purpose of this special issue is to explore how interdisciplinary research, critical theory, and aesthetic interventions help us navigate the critical zone in an era marked by the environmental polycrisis, which includes not only ecological precarity but also social and political dimensions such as rampant disinformation, increasing reactionary ideologies, and reinforced global inequality. The complexity of the situation demonstrates that solutions to the climate crisis cannot be conceived independently of the conditions of knowledge production and the concurrent struggles over the globalising knowledge economy. The humanities and social sciences are thus at an impasse: they must both account for a rapidly deteriorating material world and defend their own relevance within a political environment that increasingly dismisses them.

It would, however, be a mistake to invoke legacies of humanism while calling for a rebirth of the humanities under the environmental polycrisis. The climate emergency threatens humans just as much as all manner of creatures and non-human actors, whose ongoing marginalization constitutes part of the causal complex that is the Anthropocene. The climate emergency challenges traditional modes of narrative and representation, demanding engagement with temporalities beyond human history and ontologies beyond anthropocentrism.

By incorporating perspectives from speculative philosophy, aesthetics, political ecology, and social theory, our CFP invited scholars to challenge technocratic and depoliticized views of the critical zone, recognizing it, instead, as a space of conflict, adaptation, exhaustion, resilience, and resistance. The authors of the articles in this Special Issue responded to the challenge. The research presented here interrogates this zone from diverse disciplinary perspectives, seeking to understand the entanglement of human and non-human agencies, the infrastructures of knowledge and power, and the emergent aesthetic and theoretical frameworks shaping contemporary discourse.

Yuri Di Liberto's concept of the *catabolic turn* is particularly useful in framing our current predicament. Moving beyond the metabolic rift between humans and nature as identified in Marxist ecological thought, Di Liberto argues that we now exist in a post-metabolic reality, where human societies, like organisms in extreme deprivation, begin to consume themselves due to resource inaccessibility. This condition manifests in the accelerating desertification of landscapes, the depletion of life-sustaining ecologies, and the reinforcement of social hierarchies in the wake of environmental devastation.

This shift is further emphasized by Federica Dalla Costa's analysis of *identitarian undifferentiation* in environmental eschatology. Dalla Costa critiques the metaphor of humanity being "in the same boat" when facing ecological catastrophe, exposing the ways in which climate disaster narratives obscure entrenched social stratifications. The myth of a universal crisis fails to acknowledge the geopolitical, economic, and racial disparities that determine access to survival. Her argument resonates with Gorica Orsholits's reflections on Avital Ronell's *America: The Troubled Continent of Thought*, which traces the ideological decay of American thought in its entanglement with nationalism, fascism, and anti-intellectualism.

The denial of intellectual rigor and historical reckoning, Ronell and Orsholits point out, serves to naturalize the conditions of socio-environmental collapse, reinforcing the very forces responsible for it.

Antonio Ianniello's "Performing social unease: *Biston betularia carbonaria*" offers a counterpoint to narratives of environmental fatalism. His performance art piece, *Biston betularia carbonaria*, draws on evolutionary metaphors and political symbolism to enact social unease in response to the climate crisis. By staging the transformation of a moth species in response to industrial pollution, Ianniello asks how collective imagination might be mobilized through aesthetic interventions that challenge passive spectatorship and invite embodied participation.

This concern with aesthetic and performative responses to crisis finds echoes in Brooke Grasberger's "Remembering past distance: whaling and whalers." Grasberger employs experimental historical writing to explore the shifting materialities and memories of coastal zones, tracing the imbrication of extractive economies with changing ocean ecologies. Her meditation on the skeletal remains of whales in museums and shipwrecks in Arctic waters complicates conventional historiographies, highlighting the tensions between remembrance and erasure as well as between exploitation and conservation.

Stathis Katopodis and Alexandra Halkias's ethnographic analysis in "Between national(ist) desires, digital glamour, and everyday destruction: Eleusis as a European Capital of Culture (2023)" examines how environmental devastation and industrial ruins are repurposed as cultural capital. Their work critiques the ways in which neoliberal art initiatives leverage national heritage and ecological catastrophe to produce a consumable aesthetic of resilience while simultaneously masking ongoing processes of displacement, pollution, and labor exploitation. In their discussion of the Eleusis Terracotta Army, a project commemorating industrial workers through clay helmets, they point to the fetishization of destruction as a means of aestheticizing – and thus neutralizing – social trauma.

Expanding on these themes, Julia Rijssenbeek and Aafke Fraaije's article "Inquiring and imagining human-nature relationships through dance" explores how art-based methodologies can serve as tools for philosophical reflection on the Anthropocene. Drawing on the dance film *Cobalt*, the authors argue that embodied movement can disrupt entrenched anthropocentric perspectives and foster new modes of ecological relationality. By engaging audiences in affective and non-verbal modes of moral imagination, dance-based research offers an alternative to the discursive limitations of academic environmental philosophy.

Dimitar Ganov's review of Jacques Rancière's *Uncertain Times* reminds us that political and aesthetic interventions must navigate the paradoxes of representation and resistance. The challenge, as Rancière and Ganov point out, is to move beyond a melancholic contemplation of decline and towards active engagement with the emergent possibilities that lie within the cracks of crises.

Whether through performance, critical geography, or aesthetic theory, the contributors to this special issue urge us to rethink the critical zone as a contested site of epistemic, ecological, and political struggle. Together, these articles offer a constellation of perspectives that illuminate the fractures and frictions defining our era. They call upon us to critically inhabit the zones of instability that characterize contemporary life, to attune ourselves to the material and symbolic forces shaping our shared futures, and to forge new pathways for thought and action in an increasingly precarious world.

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